

Telephone-based psychiatry advice service for general practitioners

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TO THE EDITOR: GP-Psych Support is a national advice service on mental health management that links general practitioners (GPs) with psychiatrists by phone, fax or email within 24 hours. The service is federally funded through the Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care Initiative, and began operating in March 2004.

Over the first 6 months of operation of the phone/fax arm, there were 726 case discussions between GPs and psychiatrists. A third of the GPs were rurally located, and 17% used the service twice or more. Most GPs (94%) accessed the service through the 1800 freecall number, rather than by fax. Three-quarters identified no other suitable, accessible source of urgent psychiatric advice.

Two-thirds of cases involved female patients, and 80% were aged 19–65 years. In only 14% of cases was another mental health service provider involved (a psychiatrist in 2%). The primary diagnoses are

shown in the Box. The most common topic discussed was medication (77%), with less demand for discussions of general management principles (12%) or diagnosis (7%). However, cases were discussed broadly, and referral to another mental-health care provider was recommended in a third of cases, including to a psychiatrist in 8% of cases.

An evaluation survey with 450 randomly selected GP service users received 129 replies. Although the survey response was low (29%), the feedback was very positive, with over 99% of respondents indicating that they would consider using the service again. Over 95% of respondents reported satisfaction with the service in terms of ease of use, helpfulness of advice and ease of interaction with the psychiatrist. Compared with other sources of mental-health care advice, over 85% rated GP-Psych Support as better in regard to accessibility, reliability and the appropriateness of the advice given. Over 70% stated that contact with the service had increased their knowledge about the management of mental disorders and their confidence in managing mental health problems, and had improved the quality of care they provided to their patients. Fifty-three per cent of GPs reported an increased willingness to manage more complex mental health problems.

The 10 most common primary diagnoses among 726 patients discussed in GP-Psych Support

Diagnosis	Percentage of patients
Depression	45.9%
Mixed anxiety and depression	12.6%
Chronic psychotic disorder	8.8%
Anxiety disorder	8.6%
Acute psychotic episode	5.2%
Bipolar disorder	5.1%
Organic or cognitive disorder	3.6%
Drug or alcohol use disorder	2.5%
Somatoform disorder	1.5%
Eating disorder	1.2%

From these data, it appears that psychiatrist telephone support has been well received and adds significantly to the resources available to GPs working in mental health care.

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